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## The insider–outsider divide and contentious politics: the tripartite field of the Italian labour movement

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the consequences of the insider–outsider divide on contentious labour politics. Focussing on work-related collective actions occurring in Italy between 2008 and 2018 ( $N=9,935$ ), it is investigated how trade unions and new groups supporting insiders and outsiders are involved in actions that differ in repertoire, scale, issues claimed and by duration. Results show a tripartite field of actors who are engaged in contentious labour politics: trade union federations and professional associations – mostly representing insiders – support institutional, large-scale actions and economic claims. Unorganised and self-organised workers – mostly mobilising outsiders – are active in traditional, disruptive and small-scale actions related to economic issues. Non-working categories – students, political parties, loosely-organised groups – are engaged in traditional, large-scale actions motivated by political and social rights issues. The conclusions discuss the consequences of the growing heterogeneity of workers' representative bodies on insider–outsider political inequalities, and on class representation which hinders the emergence of a cohesive labour movement.

**KEYWORDS** Trade unions; workers' protests; labour movements; economic crisis; contentious politics

Workers at Whirpool, an American multinational manufacturer of home appliances, have been on recurrent strikes for the last three years and on 10 September 2021 they occupied the port of Naples. Supported by the major trade unions who were trying to negotiate with MISE (the Ministry of Economic Development), workers protested against forthcoming collective layoffs as the plant site was about to close and workers would not be entitled to any social safety net.

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In autumn 2012, workers in Palermo employed by a public sector company responsible for the cleaning of public spaces – gardens, beaches, roundabouts, council buildings, among others – engaged in several protests against the non-payment of their salaries and the possible closure of the company and were supported by independent trade unions as well as by social centres and the unemployed. A group of self-organised workers occupied Palermo Cathedral for eight days. They also chained themselves to the entrance gate of the Municipality of Palermo, occupied roofs, blocked traffic, and were involved in bossnapping as they locked-in and detained their manager in his workplace.

These two cases are testament to the variety of ways workers can organise and mobilise in order to claim better working conditions and avert the risk of job losses. In the first case, strikes were repeatedly called over a three-year period, while in the second case, workers engaged in radical action – including violent action – over a period of a few days. Workers in Naples were supported by major trade union confederations, which were active in enduring industrial relations negotiations with the Ministry. In Palermo, by contrast, workers were far less organised, supported by social centres and independent trade unions, and in some cases stood alone. In line with this, scholars have shown that the role of trade unions is increasingly challenged by ‘emerging (if not always new) organizations that claim to provide channels of representation for voices that are marginalized in large trade unions’ (Carver and Doellgast 2021; Meardi *et al.* 2021: 49–50).

The growing heterogeneity of workers’ representative bodies has been associated with the process of labor market dualization (Emmenegger *et al.* 2012). This concerns the segmentation of the workforce between insiders and outsiders. Insiders are those workers with stable employment relationships, protection against dismissal and full access to social protection, while outsiders are workers with non-standard employment contracts including on-demand, casual, intermittent or agency work contracts, limited or no protection against dismissal, unstable employment relationships, and exclusion from the rights and social protection enjoyed by insiders. The insider–outsider cleavage marks a significant social divide in European society, and insiders and outsiders possess differential access to various institutional settings, including the industrial relations systems which tend to include insiders to the detriment of outsiders. This is especially evident in the ‘Southern model’ of industrial relations (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2018) – comprising Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece – where the labour market is segmented and the welfare state, which often consists of pro-insider policies, is unable to protect individuals from the risk of marginalisation and/or exclusion from the dualization process (Baccaro and Neimanns 2022, Damiani *et al.*

2020; Oliver and Morelock 2021). The process of dualization also has consequences on workers' access to politics as it translates into policy preference divides between insiders and outsiders, as well as outsiders' abstention from voting (Häusermann 2020; Marx and Picot 2013; Negri 2019; Rovny and Rovny 2017; Schwander and Häusermann 2013; Vlandas 2020). In this framework, the consequences of the dualization process on workers' contentious politics have, however, remained somewhat unexplored (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018; Schwander 2019; for exceptions see Grote and Wagemann 2018; Milkman and Ott 2014). In this article, we examine how the insider–outsider divide and the consequent growing heterogeneity of workers' representative bodies affect collective action in labour relations. We focus on the analysis of the repertoire of actions, the degree of decentralisation, the duration of actions and the issues raised. How workers are organised makes a difference for workers' collective action, whether they are supported by trade unions or professional associations like many insiders are, or whether they are self-organised or work in the 'shadow economy', sustained by new emerging groups such as independent, small rank-and-file trade unions that give a voice to many outsiders (see Crouch 2017; Mosimann and Pontusson 2020). As Pizzorno (1978: 32) argued when discussing the 1969 Italian Hot Autumn, only trade unions had been able to translate conflicts in specific moments and places into large-scale and durable collective action, in contrast to small groups of workers who claimed a variety of heterogeneous rights.

Empirically, we examine work-related collective actions in the specific context of the economic crisis, which provides an ideal time period given the heightened level of economic protests (Kriesi *et al.* 2020). Our study investigates those that occurred in Italy between 2008 and 2018. Belonging to the 'Southern model', Italy is characterised by its composition of multiple rival trade unions based on different ideological stances (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2018 [2013]: 20). While trade unions are still the actors granted most legitimacy in Italian industrial relations (Regalia and Regini 2018), new groups have emerged like in other pluralist representative systems in Europe such as the UK and in other Mediterranean countries (Meardi *et al.* 2021). Our empirical research analyzes a new dataset built following the well-established method within the literature of contentious politics known as Protest Event Analysis (PEA) (Hutter 2014; Koopmans and Rucht 2002). The dataset includes information on all different types of labour-related collective actions ( $N=9,935$ ) occurring in Italy between 1 January 2008 and 31 December 2018, spanning from institutional action to the most disruptive protests, and on major actors supporting them, including both trade unions and other new mobilising groups.

This article differs from most existing studies in terms of its focus and approach. To date, the insiders-outsiders divide has been explored by considering the effect of different positions of workers in the labour market or their belonging to an occupational group. In this article, drawing on a resource mobilisation perspective within the literature of contentious politics, we examine this divide by considering insider and outsider representative bodies, namely trade unions mostly representing insiders (Jansen and Lehr 2019), and the new mobilising groups which have more recently emerged to support outsiders' claims. We also contribute to the integration of current knowledge on the effect of labour market dualization on political inequalities in the electoral arena, with insights into political inequalities in contentious labour politics, which is currently an unexplored field.

### **Challenges from the insider–outsider divide on trade unions**

Recent theories on workers' representation have focussed on changes associated with the process of dualization and the growing presence of outsiders within the labour force. Scholars have investigated how trade unions – which are, together with social democratic parties, bodies which represent the interests of the working class (Durazzi *et al.* 2018: 207; see however Mosimann *et al.* 2019; Mosimann and Pontusson 2020; Rennwald and Pontusson 2021) – have dealt with this particular challenge. On the one hand, comparative political economists argue that trade union federations tend to protect insiders (Crouch 2017; Lindbeck and Snower 1988; Rueda 2005), and that their membership is mostly associated with the presence of insiders (Jansen and Lehr 2019), although outsiders agree with the need for strong unions (Oliver and Morelock 2021). According to this line of reasoning, trade union federations have lost power in mobilising workers due to the growing presence of outsiders. On the other hand, industrial relations scholars have recognised trade unions' efforts towards the inclusion of outsiders, and the promotion of several strategies of revitalisation in the effort to incorporate new claims by workers (Benassi and Vlandas 2016; Durazzi 2017; Keune and Pedaci 2020; Natili and Puricelli 2021; Pulignano *et al.* 2016). One strategy regards trade unions' promotion of alliances with other organisations that have emerged to support workers through dynamics of what has been referred to as social movement unionism (Baccaro *et al.* 2003). With the process of dualization, new representative bodies have in fact grown, mostly to account for the new claims made by outsiders, and the organisational field of workers' representative bodies has become more heterogeneous (Carver and Doellgast 2021; Meardi *et al.* 2021). Following prior scholarship (Kriesi *et al.* 2020, Ch. 5; Pizzorno 1978; Tilly 1978:

96) and, in particular, drawing on the resource mobilisation perspective within the literature on contentious politics (McCarthy and Zald 1977), we argue that this increased organisational heterogeneity has several consequences on contentious politics in industrial relations, in particular, on the type of collective action (whether institutional, traditional or disruptive), their scale (whether local or large-scale), their duration (the number of days the action lasts), and the issues raised.

### ***The type of actions***

Workers' representative bodies can be involved in, organise, and support a variety of collective actions in the field of contentious politics. Actions by trade unions can range from protests like strikes and demonstrations, to disruptive actions like squatting, to institutional actions including collective bargaining and workplace regulation, negotiations with state institutions and employers in order to pursue social dialogue and compromise (Pizzorno 1978). Nonetheless, trade unions have assumed a growing importance within institutional politics in recent decades. Since the 1990s, many countries have adopted 'social pacts' to solve industrial conflicts, particularly in Southern Europe (Keune and Marginson 2013; Vandaele 2016). Furthermore, trade unions across Europe have been increasingly involved as service delivery providers and have become more dependent on their role in contemporary welfare states (Ebbinghaus 2002; Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999). In Italy, in particular, the high level of trade union density – in 2018 it was still at 34.4 percent (Regalia and Regini 2018: 69) – is largely due to the high proportion of retired workers among their members for whom trade unions provide various services like fiscal assistance, organisation of social activities for the elderly, services related to housing rights and consumer information. At the same time, trade union federations are competing with small, independent, rank-and-file trade unions and informal networks, like the 'rider unions' which are self-organised collectives of food delivery riders working for online platforms (Alberti and Però 2018; Chesta *et al.* 2019: 821; Rizzo and Atzeni 2020; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). In this context, we might expect trade unions and the new emerging groups to have engaged in different types of action in the last decade. We expect trade union federations to have pursued more institutional actions, such as negotiations, than protest actions given their growing role within the institutional arena. In contrast, we also expect the new emerging groups to have lacked the legitimation that established trade unions enjoy and therefore to have engaged less in institutional actions and more in traditional and disruptive protests (*different repertoire of actions hypothesis*, HY1).

### **The scale and duration of action**

Trade unions and new emerging groups are endowed with different organisational resources. Trade union federations are characterised by horizontal and vertical structures at the national, regional and local level, and are reinforced by workplace level representation which promotes second-level bargaining and adaptability of action by trade union federations to local contexts. In addition to an established structure and a widespread network of offices diffused throughout the country, trade unions also have, in the eyes of political authorities, symbolic legitimacy and legal recognition as the appropriate body for representing workers, as they are often the only actors within industrial relations that can sign collective agreements for many occupational categories. These are characteristics that many new emerging groups like small rank-and-file trade unions, self-organised workers' groups or, to an even lesser extent, unorganised workers, scarcely possess. On account of these resources, we thus expect trade union federations to engage more in large-scale and national coordinated action, as occurred during the demonstrations against the educational reforms in Italy in 2010 (Zamponi 2012), than small rank-and-file trade unions and unorganised workers. Due to their organisational structure, this hypothesis is also likely to work for organisations, like professional associations or social movement and civil society organisations (SMOs and CSOs), active during the anti-austerity protests of the Great Recession (*different scale hypothesis, HY2*).

For the same reasons, in connection with different organisational resources, trade unions and other mobilising groups may differ in terms of their ability to support long-lasting action. Since trade unions are established organisations endowed with multiple resources, we expect them to be able to mobilise and support workers in long-term action in comparison to small and informal groups (*different duration hypothesis, HY3*).

### **The issues raised**

Trade unions and the new emerging groups tend to support different claims too. As demonstrated by the insider–outsider theory (Lindbeck and Snower 1988), insiders' interest is to maximise their own wages. Furthermore, insiders tend to care about their acquired rights, job security and low taxes while outsiders and their representative bodies are more likely to be interested in the expansion of jobs, in obtaining more generous unemployment benefits and to support employment promotion measures (Burgoon and Dekker 2010; Rueda 2005; Schwander 2019; Schwander and Häusermann 2013). Evidence shows that, generally, during the Great Recession, economic claims prevailed over other issues, namely

cultural claims (Kriesi *et al.* 2020). While both insiders and outsiders' actions were motivated by economic issues, we nonetheless expect trade unions to be more associated with insiders' claims – workplace conditions and health, national collective contracts agreements – than with outsiders' issues such as temporary employment, social safety nets or contract renewal (*insiders and outsiders' different issues hypothesis, HY4*).

During the Great Recession, workers also often targeted governments instead of employers, with political motivations marking their demands for less austerity and more democracy. For this reason, from 2008 onwards, in addition to economic claims like those motivated by layoffs or wage cuts, workers have supported protests motivated by a political reaction to austerity measures, especially when these measures directly affected their conditions like labour market or pension reforms. This phenomenon has been observed in relation to teachers and other professionals in the education sector participating in the protests against the 2010 Gelmini reform (Andretta 2018; Zamponi 2012). We do not argue that trade unions supported political claims differently from the new groups mobilising workers. Instead, we argue that these protests were often supported by non-working categories like students, as demonstrated in the literature on anti-austerity protests (Kriesi *et al.* 2020). While these groups acted on political claims, they may not necessarily have been supportive of economic claims per sé (*economic, political, and social rights issues hypothesis, HY5*).

Our five hypotheses are drawn from a resource mobilisation perspective of contentious politics (McCarthy and Zald 1977). This approach, more than others, places its attention on challengers, and their organizational resources. A different approach in the literature on contentious politics suggests, however, that groups and organisations do not act in a vacuum and thus changes in the political context where they operate may affect their opportunities to engage in collective actions (Tarrow 1989; Tilly 1978). In short, actions are affected by how open or closed the so-called political opportunity structure (POS) is. The latter includes some stable aspects of political institutions, such as a country's type of democracy or the type of electoral system, as well as more unstable or contingent dimensions such as the degree of political stability or the cabinet orientation (Kriesi *et al.* 1995). Given our timeframe, January 2008–December 2018, we can thus advance hypotheses on how contingent dimensions of the POS affected contentious politics in labour relations. In particular Italy experienced an extremely high level of political instability with seven different cabinets in power in the period under consideration: from the centre-left Prodi government (May 2006–May 2008), to the centre-right Berlusconi IV government (May 2008–November 2011), passing through Monti's technical government (November 2011–April 2013), the three



centre-left governments Letta I, Renzi and Gentiloni Silveri I (April 2013–May 2018), and the Conte government supported by the League and Five Star Movement (June 2018–September 2019). We expect, therefore, for the political differences in these governments to have impacted upon workers' opportunities to engage in collective action (Andretta 2018). Furthermore, the phase of the crisis when collective action occurred (either in the early phase of the crisis between 2008 and 2010, the core of the crisis between 2011 and 2014 or in the phase of demobilisation after 2015) may also be associated with different forms of collective action (Kriesi *et al.* 2020). While the timing of the emergence of disruptive action is a contested issue in literature – as some argue that violence is typical of early risers, while others contend that the radicalisation of action is a process observed during the phase of demobilisation – institutional action tends to develop more consistently in the demobilisation phase of a wave of contention (Kriesi *et al.* 2020, Ch. 5; Tarrow 1989).<sup>1</sup>

## Methods

### Data source

Data on work-related collective action was collected by drawing on a selection of articles from the print newspaper and online daily versions of *La Repubblica*, one of the major Italian newspapers. We collected data from 1 January 2008 up to 31 December 2018 using both the national and ten local edition of *La Repubblica* resulting in a sample of 9,935 collective actions. Our unit of analysis includes diverse types of collective action, both protest and less contentious action such as negotiations. The dataset provides original data for two reasons. First, in contrast to past studies using PEA, it tackles contentious politics occurring both in the protest sphere and in the institutional arena. Second, and in contrast to most studies, the dataset includes information on small-scale action as it draws on local editions of *La Repubblica*, thus providing a comprehensive account of local level action where most studies only focus on the national level (Andretta 2018; Kriesi *et al.* 2020).<sup>2</sup>

Details of the pre-test as well as the sampling strategy used to select the articles, the specific collective actions and the weights applied to data have been included in the online methodological appendix.

### Dependent and independent variables

We work on several dependent variables accounting for: the repertoire of action (a categorical variable differentiating between classical action such as strikes, demonstrations, and sit-ins, institutional action such as

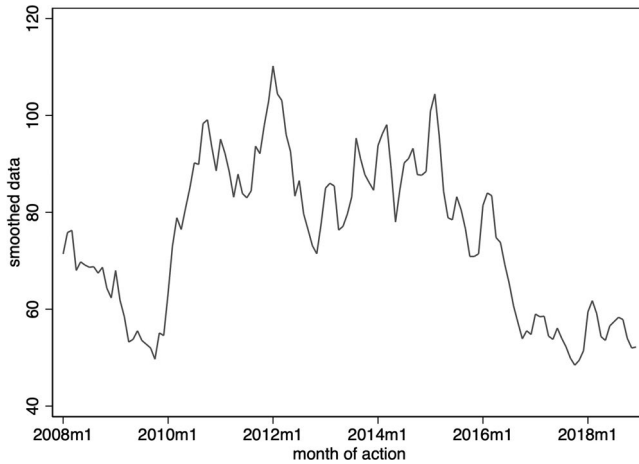
negotiations, and disruptive action such as squatting and traffic blocks); the scale of action (a dichotomous variable distinguishing between local level and large-scale action); the duration of action (a dichotomous variable considering the number of days the actions lasted: 0=less than one day; 1=at least one full day); the issues raised (five dichotomous variables accounting for whether workers' claims concerned economic, political or social rights issues and whether they concerned insiders' issues such as wages or agreements on collective contracts, or outsiders' issues such as contract renewals, temporary jobs or the reintegration of redundant workers). To test our hypotheses on how workers' representative bodies are associated with different characteristics of collective action, we use the following dummy variables operationalising the presence of the following actors involved in actions: trade union federations; independent, rank-and-file trade unions; trade unions that are not specified; self-organised groups of workers; unorganised workers; professional organisations; civil society organisations (CSOs); political parties; the unemployed; loosely organised actors such as social centres or migrant committees; students; and a final broad category including local authority representatives, citizens, parents, migrants. While trade union federations and professional associations mostly represent insiders, the new groups include independent trade unions, self-organised groups of workers, unorganised workers, and the unemployed mostly representing outsiders. CSOs, political parties, loosely organised actors such as social centres, migrant committees, students and citizens represent non-working categories involved in work-related collective actions, like demonstrations against precarious working conditions. The latter represents a minority of actions compared to workers' collective actions.

The full explanation of the operationalisation of the political context variables, the periodisation of the actions, and other control variables is included in the online methodological appendix.

To test our hypotheses, we use a multinomial logit model when the dependent variable is the type of action, and logit models when the dependent variables are the scale, the issue and the duration of actions. For the purpose of this analysis, we consider the effect of all variables to be time invariant. In other words, we do not expect that the effect of trade unions and other mobilising groups on the frequency, scale, issue and duration of action changes across the years considered.

## Results

The 2008 crisis and post-crisis period was characterised by a distinct wave of mobilisation by workers in Italy (Figure 1). There was a steady increase in the number of contentious actions in labour relations between



**Figure 1.** Number of collective actions, smoothed monthly data; 4-span moving average centred on and including the current observation, 4 lagged observations and 4-forward observations (Italy 2008–2018, unweighted data).

the end of 2009 and end of 2011. The years between 2011 and 2014 witnessed high and persistent levels of contention and only after 2014 did the number of protests start to decrease.

Traditional forms of action like strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations were the most common forms of protest, while institutional action such as negotiations, and disruptive action such as traffic blocks or squatting were much less common (Table 1). After 2012, both traditional and disruptive action started to decline, while institutional action was more frequent and persistent after 2012 than in the early phase of the crisis.

A variety of actors supported these actions (Table 2), with trade union federations being those supporting workers the most (50.2 percent of all actions). The peak of trade union federation involvement corresponds to the peak of the wave of contention between 2011 and 2014. The presence of independent trade unions between 2008 and 2018 was, in general, far lower than trade union federations as they took part, on average, more than two times less frequently. A high proportion of the actions were not supported by any organisation. 24.7 percent of actors involved were in fact unorganised workers who were mostly active in the early and core phases of mobilisation, especially in 2012 when their presence increased by approximately 10 percentage points compared to 2011.

### ***The repertoire of actions***

Trade union federations mostly engaged in institutional action like negotiations (23.5 percent), in strikes (22.1 percent), sit-ins and

**Table 1.** Major types of action, by year (Italy 2008–2018, weighted data).

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
<i>Traditional actions</i>												
Strike	27.43	25.88	20.66	18.17	23.00	18.06	19.05	20.80	21.83	26.15	23.43	21.77
Sit-in	20.11	19.21	18.82	13.84	19.10	16.02	12.24	14.94	15.18	14.26	13.28	16.02
Demonstration	15.20	15.84	14.85	13.35	13.90	9.90	10.00	9.68	10.74	8.47	11.96	12.12
Assembly	4.53	2.64	4.79	4.31	7.25	8.77	9.40	8.92	7.19	7.14	6.28	6.64
Picket	1.67	2.30	1.54	0.91	1.37	1.24	2.18	0.47	0.26	0.63	0.16	1.18
Other traditional actions (teaching blocks, outdoor teaching, petitions, white strikes, flash mobs)	1.55	0.48	3.89	2.86	2.25	2.20	1.46	3.28	0.79	0.86	0.89	2.00
Total traditional actions	70.49	66.35	64.55	53.44	66.87	56.19	54.33	58.09	55.99	57.51	56.00	59.73
<i>Institutional actions</i>												
Negotiations	9.55	8.53	7.52	16.59	12.47	21.35	22.58	21.31	24.87	25.92	30.91	18.10
States of agitation	2.68	2.19	1.80	4.92	3.06	3.59	3.72	3.73	2.12	2.11	2.82	3.09
Rejection of consultation	1.54	1.81	1.00	0.88	0.11	1.16	0.95	1.56	1.14	2.14	1.21	1.16
Revocations	2.02	1.45	1.20	1.08	0.95	0.86	1.41	1.18	0.53	0.64	1.04	1.12
Other institutional actions (Legal actions, interruptions of negotiations, referenda)	1.27	0.46	1.38	1.57	0.89	1.84	2.44	1.67	1.62	0.95	1.23	1.45
Total institutional actions	17.06	14.44	12.90	25.04	17.48	28.80	31.10	29.45	30.28	31.76	37.21	24.92
<i>Disruptive actions</i>												
Squatting	3.14	6.93	10.18	4.08	4.63	3.62	3.99	1.80	2.05	1.03	0.63	3.94
Traffic/goods/port block	4.41	5.39	4.76	4.23	6.37	5.61	2.49	2.78	1.77	0.75	0.57	3.72
Other disruptive actions (damages, Hunger/thirst strike, chaining of workers)	0.81	1.40	1.65	2.03	1.06	0.94	0.91	0.34	0.26	1.66	0.43	1.06
Total disruptive actions	8.36	13.72	16.59	10.34	12.06	10.17	7.39	4.92	4.08	3.44	1.63	8.72
Other actions	4.11	5.49	5.98	11.17	3.60	4.85	7.20	7.54	9.67	7.30	5.14	6.61
N (weighted data)	823.4	641.5	952.7	1,087	1,047	1,053	1,089	944.3	797.6	695.3	674.4	9,807
N (unweighted data)	853	656	981	1,105	1,071	1,056	1,075	943	808	685	667	9,900

Source: own elaboration based on our data (1<sup>st</sup> Jan 2008–31<sup>st</sup> Dec 2018).



**Table 2.** Types of actors involved in work-related collective actions by year (Italy 2008–2018, unweighted data).

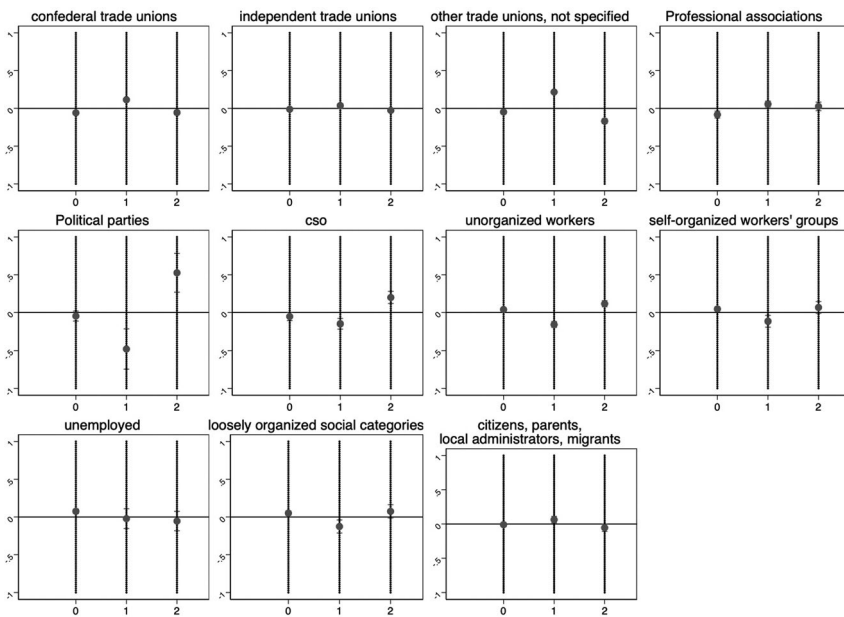
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
Trade union federations	45.0	43.6	38.4	48.8	43.9	53.9	57.0	60.2	56.9	52.3	52.5	50.2
autonomous trade union	19.5	25.2	19.8	22.2	17.1	21.4	30.1	31.0	18.6	21.0	19.5	22.4
trade unions, not specified	8.8	7.3	10.5	16.0	14.5	15.5	11.7	15.8	17.6	16.4	17.5	13.8
self-organised workers' groups	1.8	3.2	5.3	2.5	0.7	0.8	0.7	1.8	0.2	0.7	1.0	1.7
unorganised workers	30.7	31.1	30.9	24.2	34.3	20.9	16.6	16.4	20.4	26.0	20.7	24.6
<i>Others</i>												
unemployed	0.2	0.5	5.8	1.4	0.8	2.2	0.8	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.4	1.3
loosely organised social categories	1.5	2.0	3.7	3.4	2.3	7.1	6.0	1.3	0.9	0.9	1.9	3.1
Professional associations	6.1	6.1	6.4	7.1	5.1	6.2	4.3	9.4	4.3	3.9	5.1	5.9
CSOs	1.4	3.0	3.4	6.2	2.1	2.0	1.5	2.5	2.0	2.8	4.8	2.9
political parties	0.9	2.4	1.9	4.9	1.2	0.8	1.2	1.2	1.5	0.9	1.8	1.7
students	3.6	3.4	6.9	4.0	3.5	2.1	2.5	2.1	0.9	1.3	0.9	3.0
citizens, parents, local administrators, migrant workers	5.4	2.0	5.4	12.8	4.7	6.1	6.5	4.3	1.9	0.6	3.6	5.3
N	853	656	981	1,105	1,071	1,056	1,075	943	808	685	667	9,900

Note: The columns are based on multiple items which add up to more than 100 percent because more than one actor could be present during the same action. Therefore, the cells represent, for each category, the percentage of actions in which an organisation/a group was active in the specified years.

Source: own elaboration based on our data (1<sup>st</sup> Jan 2008–31<sup>st</sup> Dec 2018).

demonstrations. In turn, independent trade unions predominantly mobilised workers in strikes (29.0 percent). Trade unions engaged much less in disruptive protests, like squatting and traffic blocks which mostly involved unorganised workers (approximately 17 percent of all actions) together with strikes and sit-ins. This pattern is confirmed by our multivariable analysis. Specifically, [Figure 2](#) shows the average marginal effects (AMEs) for all different types of actors, that is, the discrete change in the predicted probability of engaging in disruptive, institutional and traditional action from the base level (the full models of the Figures are reported in the online appendix, [Tables A1–A3](#)).

As [Figure 2](#) shows, the predicted probability of being involved in institutional action for trade union federations is approximately 10 percentage points higher than the predicted probability of supporting other action. The same is true for other trade unions, for professional associations (see first row of [Figure 2](#)) and for the broad category of citizens. Insider representative bodies, trade unions and professional associations are also negatively and significantly associated with disruptive action. In turn, non-working groups and outsider new emerging groups are positively and significantly associated with traditional repertoires of action like



**Figure 2.** Change in the predicted probabilities of engaging in different forms of actions (0=disruptive protest actions; 1=institutional actions; 2=traditional protest actions) for various mobilising actors (Italy, 2008–2018 weighted data) (full model in online appendix, [Table A1](#), model 1).

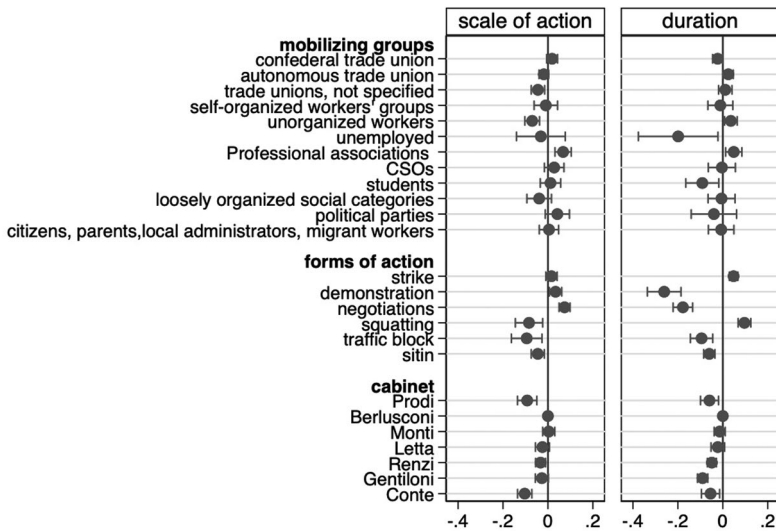
strikes. Finally, most outsider groups tend to participate more in disruptive action and less in institutional action than other action. Overall, these results tend to confirm hypothesis 1: the presence of a different repertoire of actions between insider and outsider representative bodies. Additionally, they show that non-working categories have a more diverse repertoire compared to working categories. The multivariable analysis also confirms that institutional action was more likely to occur during the left governments led by Letta, Renzi and Gentiloni from May 2013 onwards and the 2018 Conte government than under Berlusconi. At the same time, disruptive action was less likely to occur under these governments. The rise of institutional action and the decline of disruptive action after 2013 suggests that the class cleavage somehow pacified under the leftist governments when institutional action prevailed. In particular, institutional action was more likely to be observed after 2010, that is, during the core and post-crisis periods, than during the initial phase of the crisis (see online appendix, [Table A2](#)), which is in line with previous studies (Tarrow 1989). Results also show that disruptive action is a characteristic of early risers as they were less likely to emerge after 2015 than they were in the initial phase of the cycle (see online appendix, [Table A2](#)), confirming findings on anti-austerity protests (Kriesi *et al.* 2020, Ch. 5).<sup>3</sup>

### ***The scale and duration of action***

Most of the action functioned on a local scale as more than 80 percent involved workers on a city-wide basis. On average, only 9 percent of all action in that period escalated to a national level, suggesting that workers' collective action is highly localised, often limited to specific workplaces. Strikes and demonstrations, as well as negotiations, tend to be large-scale action, addressing national or regional governments, while the most disruptive actions such as squatting and traffic blocks typically occur at a local level (around 95 percent). Strikes and negotiations mostly concern contract renewals or working conditions, especially in the case of some occupational categories like bus, train or taxi drivers. The latter went on strike against the January 2012 austerity decree adopted by the Monti government, known as the 'Grow-decree'. This included a number of liberalisation measures such as those aimed at increasing the number of taxi licences. More generally, large-scale action was more likely to occur during the core period of the crisis, between 2011 and 2014, than in the early period of 2008–2010 (see online appendix, [Table A2](#)). However, large-scale action also included general strikes against the reforms introduced by Berlusconi's government (May 2008–November 2011), when many professionals got involved in nationwide strikes and demonstrations. In particular, the 2010 'Gelmini reform' named after the Minister of

Education in Berlusconi's cabinet, severely cut the educational budget and changed the general governance of universities and aspects relating to research and employment, which mobilised teachers and workers in the education sector. That same year, the Bondi reform, named after the Minister of Culture Sandro Bondi, mobilised cultural professionals into action, specifically orchestra and theatre workers, because it decreased public funds for lyric foundations and changed the national collective agreement for orchestra workers. Looking at the role of the specific cabinets, large scale action was more likely to occur under Berlusconi's government than others (Figure 3, left hand graph).

Considering in more detail the variables testing our second hypothesis on the link between the type of mobilising group and the scale of action, trade union federations were involved in more than half of the large-scale actions examined. Generally, organised actors such as trade unions, but also CSOs, professional associations and political parties were more engaged in these actions than those on a local level (see Table 2). This is demonstrated by Coldiretti, the main Italian organisation representing agricultural entrepreneurs, who in 2008 engaged in nationwide demonstrations to ask for more funding and later, to promote the 'made in Italy' brand. In contrast, unorganised workers were mostly active in action on a local scale. Results of the multivariable analysis presented in Figure



Note: the following variables have been omitted from the graphs: region, type of edition, police intervention, workers' occupation. Berlusconi's cabinet is the reference category for the variable cabinet. (see online methodological appendix for the full models)

**Figure 3.** Change in the predicted probabilities of engaging in large-scale and long-term actions (Italy, 2008–2018, weighted data) (full models in online appendix, Table A1, model 2 and 3).



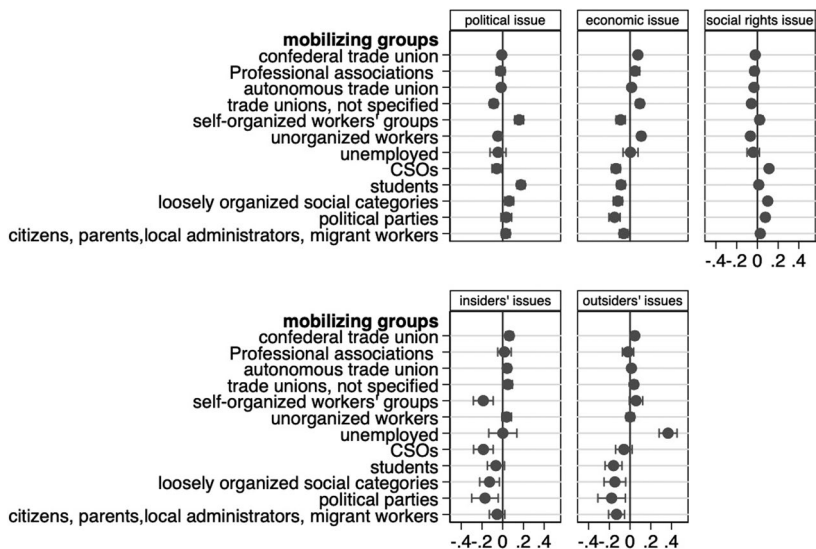
3 (left-hand graph) tend to confirm this pattern. The predicted probability of professional associations engaging in large-scale action is approximately 9 percentage points higher than that of engaging in small-scale action. For trade union federations the result is less consistent across the models (see however the significant effect in model 3 of online appendix, [Table A3](#)). As expected, some of the new emerging groups, namely independent trade unions and the unorganised workers, are less likely to engage in large-scale action. The results tend to confirm our *hypothesis 2* on different scales of action in which insider and outsider representative organisations are involved. Insider representative bodies have the resources to support large-scale action, and this especially holds for professional organisations, while outsider new emerging groups are unable to carry out large-scale actions. This is most probably due to lack of resources, such as the presence of offices spread across the country, that are necessary to allow the coordination of action across regional borders and beyond the local city level.

The duration of actions follows a similar pattern to that of the scale. Most actions have a short duration and only a limited number of them lasts 24h or more. These characteristics are not new to Italy, given that between 1950 and 1978, the typical Italian strike was ‘small and brief’ (Franzosi 2006 [1995]: 4). Long-term actions, mostly strikes and squatting including the occupation of buildings or public sites (see [Figure 3](#), right hand graph), were carried out by transport workers, in particular bus and tram drivers in various Italian cities as well as train and taxi drivers who went on strike against austerity reforms during the Monti government. Long-term actions have also been carried out by blue collar workers who challenged influential national private companies, such as the steel workers’ protest in Fincantieri’s Palermo shipyards. Fincantieri is one of the world’s largest shipbuilding groups, and in July 2011 workers occupied the factory roofs and cranes against the risk of layoffs anticipated in its industrial plan. Furthermore, steel workers in Taranto, Apulia, protested against ILVA, one of the biggest steel plant sites in Europe. The latter was at the centre of an environmental scandal in 2012 that led to the conviction of the owners and the transfer and control of the company to ArcelorMittal, the world’s largest steel producer. Following these events, in September and October 2012 steel workers went on hunger and thirst strikes, and chained themselves to the factory chimneys for several days. Long-term action also involved professionals such as orchestra workers in Turin who went on strike for several days in 2008 against the Bondi reform. As for large-scale actions, long-term action was more likely to occur under Berlusconi’s government than most other governments ([Figure 3](#) right-hand side). Results in [Figure 3](#), however, suggest overall that there is no clear-cut division between insider and outsider

representative bodies in the duration of their actions. The predicted probability of supporting long-term action shows that independent trade unions, unorganised workers, and professional associations are all positively and significantly associated with long-term action. In contrast, trade union federations, the unemployed and students are significantly associated with short-term action. These results thus do not confirm the *different duration hypothesis HY3* in the way that we expected.

### The issues raised

Workers engaged in collective action are mostly (83.2 percent) motivated by economic claims, specifically working and contractual conditions, layoffs and the non-payment of salaries. As Figure 4 shows (bottom half of Figure 4), trade union federations are likely to engage in issues associated with both insiders – wages, working conditions and health issues, or agreements on a collective contract for some occupational categories – and outsiders, such as fixed contracts, the renewal of their contracts, social safety nets or job placement. In turn, self-organised workers are less concerned with insider issues and together with the unemployed are more concerned with issues regarding outsiders. These results tend to



Note: the following variables have been omitted from the graphs: repertoire, cabinet, region, type of edition, police intervention, workers' occupation. Berlusconi's cabinet is the reference category for the variable cabinet. (see online methodological appendix for the full models)

**Figure 4.** Change in the predicted probabilities of engaging in political, economic or social rights claims (upper graphs) and in insiders and outsiders' issues (lower graphs) (Italy, 2008–2018, weighted data) (full models in online appendix, Table A1, model 4 to 8).

confirm that insider and outsider representative bodies are motivated by different issues. However, they also suggest that trade union federations do engage in activities that resonate with outsider interests. Therefore, while trade unions mostly protect insiders (Jansen and Lehr 2019), the analysis of the issues raised suggests trade unions make an effort to incorporate outsiders (Benassi and Vlandas 2016; Natili and Puricelli 2021). The *insiders and outsiders' different issues hypothesis*, HY4 is thus not confirmed.

In addition to economic claims, 16.3 percent of all actions observed between 2008 and 2018 relate to political claims, such as reforms, EU regulations, national or local government policies and 8.1 percent of workers' claims relate to social rights such as the housing crisis, solidarity, anti-racism, war and terrorism, environmental issues. The upper graphs in Figure 4 show that there are clearly two categories of groups mobilised on either political and social rights or on economic claims. On the one hand, most professional associations and trade unions, regardless of whether confederal or independent, are positively and significantly associated with economic claims. At the same time, they are less engaged in social rights claims and are not significantly more engaged in political claims than other types of issues. Self-organised workers are the only group with significant levels of engagement in political claims. This suggests that when trade unions are absent, workers may at times join other non-working actors such as students or informal groups that actively make political claims. Conversely, a second category of groups includes non-working actors like CSOs, students, political parties, loosely organised social categories, which is less likely to be associated with economic claims but is positively associated with political or social rights claims. These results mostly confirm our *economic, political, and social rights issues hypothesis*, HY5. When looking at the three broad types of claims – economic, political and social rights – a division clearly runs between working groups, regardless of whether they represent insiders or outsiders, and non-working groups. Economic claims are significantly more present among workers and their representative bodies who are also significantly less active in making political and social rights claims. Political and social rights claims, in turn, are mostly raised by non-working categories. Finally, while political claims were more likely to occur under Monti's government – which passed the austerity reforms – than in the early phase of the crisis (see online appendix, Table A1), the most contentious reforms were the Gelmini school reforms passed in 2010 by Berlusconi's government, and two reforms passed by Renzi's government in 2015, the labour market reform referred to as the Jobs Act and the 'Good School' reform of the educational sector.<sup>4</sup>

## Discussion and conclusions

This article aimed to study the consequences of the insider–outside divide on workers’ collective action by looking at insider and outsider representative bodies in Italy and their involvement in collective action between 2008 and 2018. Our results confirm that there are significant differences in the repertoire, scale, and claims made by different types of workers’ representative bodies while duration does not differentiate along the expected division between insider and outsider mobilising groups. The results suggest the presence of a tripartite group of actors in the field of labour-related contentious politics (Table 3).

First, trade union federations and professional associations, mostly representing insiders, give greater support to institutional, large-scale action and economic claims than other actors. This includes the 2011 metal workers’ demonstrations against Federmeccanica, the Italian Federation of Metalworking Industries, for contract renewals which were backed by trade unions as well as strikes by service station attendants backed by professional associations during the years of the crisis. A second component active in contentious labour politics consists of the new emerging groups that involve unorganised workers, self-organised workers, and the unemployed – mostly representing outsiders – who engaged more in traditional and disruptive action and less in institutional action. Action by unorganised workers tends to be on a local scale and is generally highly heterogeneous. It includes, *inter alia*, self-organised workers like farmers, shepherds and heavy truck and lorry drivers active in the Pitchfork protests (*‘i Forconi’*) which occurred at the end of December 2013. These protests consisted of a series of traffic blocks starting in Sicily and then spreading across Italy against the left-wing Letta government policies and were at times supported by extreme right groups such as Casapound. Outsider action also includes

**Table 3.** The tripartite field of actors involved in work-related collective actions.

	Workers’ groups		Non-working groups
	Trade unions and professional organisations (Insiders)	Self-organised, unorganised and unemployed groups (Outsiders)	CSOs, political parties, students, etc.
Repertoire of actions	Institutional actions	Traditional and disruptive actions	Traditional actions
Scale of actions	Large-scale actions	Local scale actions	Large-scale actions (students)
Issues claimed in actions	Economic issues, not social rights issues	Economic issues, not social rights issues	Political and social rights issues, not economic issue

Note: a. The duration of actions is left out as it is not a characteristic differentiating the tripartite field.

metal workers who recurrently blocked road traffic throughout the years of the crisis in protest against layoffs at Fincantieri shipbuilding group at Castellammare di Stabia (Naples). In this regard, the role of independent trade unions requires further investigation as their behaviour is similar to trade union federations in some respects, such as the repertoire of action and issues raised in their claims, while it differs in others such as the scale of actions. In particular, our results suggest that we need to distinguish among the various independent trade unions as some of them, like COBAS in the Italian case, are now nationwide organisations which more closely resemble trade union federations than the loose structures of new emerging groups. In addition to insider and outsider representative bodies, the third and final category of actors involved in contentious labour politics includes non-working actors. These are students, political parties, loosely organised social categories like social centres or migrant committees that tend to be associated with traditional forms of action like demonstrations. Furthermore, they are distinctly more active around political and social rights claims and less around economic issues. These were, as mentioned, the protagonists of the anti-austerity protests.

The presence of this tripartite field of actors has a few consequences. First, workers and representative bodies are divided, and this entails greater difficulty in finding shared objectives for joint action. Each organisation represents a segment of the labour force, in many cases either insiders or outsiders, with different ways of claims-making. The presence of non-working groups adds further complexity to an already heterogeneous workforce. This reduces the availability of structural conditions for shared actions. The stratification of the mobilisation process thus generates a problem of class representation: workers and the various organisations and groups representing them do not necessarily reciprocally recognise one another and they therefore end up less able to share a collective identity, which is necessary for sustained collective actions and labour movements (Tarrow 1998). Further research may contribute, in this direction, to shedding light on possible networks formed by trade unions and other actors in the field in the attempt to clarify whether a common relational ground for joint collective action exists. This holds particularly for confederal and independent trade unions which share a similar repertoire of actions and interests in the same issues. Exploratory analyses of our dataset on co-participation by trade union federations and independent trade unions in the same actions confirm that they participate more often in the same actions than trade union federations do with other mobilising groups. Dynamics of social movement unionism – those strategies of revitalisation undertaken by trade union federations when allying with other actors – appear to be crucial to fostering joint

collective action (Baccaro *et al.* 2003; Barron *et al.* 2016; Pilati and Perra 2020; Tapia and Alberti 2019).

A second point relates to the presence of highly territorialised labour conflicts and the high frequency of small-scale actions. This suggests, on the one hand, that workers are able to reach out to the peripheries, rather than concentrating their actions in the centre, once represented by big industrial sites. This represents a positive asset *per sé*, to the extent that marginalised peripheries become crucial centres of workers' mobilisation in this scenario. On the other hand, however, if peripheries are not connected to one another, workers risk engaging in small and peripheral action that eventually becomes marginalised. As such, by applying Pizzorno's centre-periphery hypothesis, insiders appear to be at the centre of industrial relations, while outsiders ultimately remain at their periphery.

Finally, as already stated above, with support from established trade unions and professional organisations, insiders are more likely to take part in institutional and large-scale action than outsiders who, supported by new emerging groups, do not engage in such actions. Insiders' action will be legitimated by the presence of trade union federations or professional organisations, the most – if not the only – recognised actors in Italian industrial relations (Regalia and Regini 2018: 64). Insiders are also more likely to find responsive politicians and employers as the latter may become more responsive to workers' claims when workers are represented by legitimised actors like established trade unions. In contrast, independent trade unions and other mobilising groups lack recognition *vis-à-vis* both employers and political institutions (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2018 [2013]: 23; Martínez *et al.* 2017) and their actions risk being easily dismissed, as occurred in the case of workers' protests in Palermo described in the introduction.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, insiders and outsiders may experience political inequalities due to a differing ability to engage in contentious politics, with socio-economic inequalities ultimately overlapping with political inequalities.

On the whole, our results refer to Italy, to the detriment of insights into other European countries that a comparative perspective would offer. When considering Italy in comparison with other Southern European countries, several studies focussing on protests occurring at the same time period show that Italy did not witness such an intense wave of mobilisation (Andretta 2018; Kriesi *et al.* 2020; Zamponi 2012). A study on contentious episodes between 2008 and 2016 shows that the largest number of protests took place in Greece, Portugal, Spain, and Ireland, mostly public demonstrations and strikes (Pilati 2021: 198; see Rüdiger and Karyotis (2014), Altiparmakis and Lorenzini (2018) and Portos and Carvalho (2019) for specific analyses on protests in Southern European

countries). Studies on the Italian case in fact argue that no long-lasting wave of anti-austerity mobilisation emerged in Italy (Andretta 2018; Zamponi 2012) while Kriesi *et al.* (2020) show that anti-austerity mobilisation in Italy was intermittent. Our results provide a different picture as workers in Italy did engage in a clear wave of mobilisation. We note that the different results are due, on the one hand, to the fact that the two populations tackled by our study and by those on anti-austerity protests do not fully overlap. On the other hand, the difference also relates to our methodological choices. First, labour contention does not only occur in the sphere of protest and trade union federations are also actively involved in contentious, yet institutional, action. In contrast to our study, most PEA research only takes into consideration protest, while we examine both protest and institutional action. Second, including local level sources allows us to incorporate a focus on small-scale actions and to catch processes of downward scale-shift and territorialisation of workers' actions that, so far, PEA studies have ignored.

Last but not least, when contrasting Italy to other European countries, we are also aware that the characteristics of industrial relations – shaping the type and level of collective bargaining – vary from model to model (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2018). However, we expect that the association found between the way workers are organised and the characteristics of their collective actions is likely to hold across different industrial relations models even though the country specific characteristics may moderate the effects that we have found in the Italian case.

## Notes

1. Given space constraints and the fact that our core argument is related to the analysis of workers' representative bodies' impact upon collective actions, we do not put forward specific hypotheses on the role of the political orientation of the cabinet which would require a more in-depth theoretical discussion. This and the arguments on other factors are included in the online methodological appendix in the section explaining the use of variables.
2. This is not only a methodological issue, as it entails substantially different results as we explain in the conclusions.
3. The time-period variable has been included in a separate model as it is highly correlated with the cabinets' political orientation.
4. We provide robustness checks on the aforementioned analyses by running the same models of Table A1 on the subsample of regions which include both the national newspaper and local edition, thus excluding those regions which only have the national edition and which may therefore be biased. Results confirm our expectations (see Table A3 in the methodological online appendix).
5. Particularly, in the case of Palermo, workers' protests were defined both as wild protests and as unacceptable behavior by some members of the

Five Star Movement [https://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2012/09/13/news/gesip\\_ancora\\_proteste\\_e\\_occupazione\\_del\\_duomo-42451220/](https://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2012/09/13/news/gesip_ancora_proteste_e_occupazione_del_duomo-42451220/), 13 September 2012, local edition of Palermo, La Repubblica. Retrieved January 20, 2020.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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